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What Barriers do Deaf Undergraduates face in acquiring Employability Skills in Higher Education? : Dr Lynne Barnes, University of Central Lancashire

Abstract

This article explores the lived experiences of deaf undergraduates' acquisition of employability skills whilst at university, as reported through a series of semi-structured one to one interviews. In particular, this report focuses on the specific themes of generic skills, emotional intelligence, communication skills, career development learning and work experience. Data provided by the interviewees shows that whilst some of the generic skills were easily attainable, other significant career development learning and job-seeking skills are more difficult for deaf students to acquire. It is evident that the acquisition of these skills is also hampered by a lack of tutor and/or peer awareness and support. This study also discusses the importance of work placement opportunities for gaining employment, and how various barriers preclude many deaf students from gaining this experience. Not least of these is the lack of funding – either from Access to Work (ATW) or Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) – which would facilitate the employment of interpreters in the voluntary work sector. In light of the increasing number of disabled students failing to find employment upon graduation (AGCAS, 2018) it is imperative that measures are taken to break down the barriers which prevent deaf students from gaining the skills and experiences which would enable them to more readily secure employment. Unless and until this is done, deaf university students will still not be able to gain the maximum benefit from the increased opportunities available to them from undergraduate study.

Introduction

This article presents an exploration of the lived experiences of deaf undergraduates regarding their acquisition of employability skills whilst at university. Research has shown that, historically, disabled people have largely been unemployed or underemployed compared to the non-disabled population (Department for Work and Pensions, 2014; Mccloughlin et al., 1987; Chabot, 2013). Whilst there is a growing body of literature which investigates the employment of disabled people in general, there is scant qualitative data on the development of employability skills amongst disabled graduates in HE. It is known that disabled graduates have lower rates of employment in comparison with their non-disabled graduate peers (AGCAS, 2015; AGCAS,

2018), but not the reasons behind this. Similarly, research illustrates that deaf and hard of hearing people generally experience more unemployment, are often underemployed and have lower incomes than the hearing population (MacLeod-Gallinger, 1992; RNID, 2006; Winn, 2007; The Papworth Trust, 2018) but very little has been written about the experiences of deaf graduates. The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) reports and Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) surveys provide year-on-year statistics regarding UK graduates. It is possible to extract information about deaf graduates from these sources. However, this information can be scant, and, as with most of the literature regarding deaf people (see Harris & Thornton, 2005), it does not differentiate between those with mild hearing losses and BSL users.

This is a critical point to note, as it skews the figures if one wants to explore the employment of profoundly deaf BSL users, for whom English is not a first language. Their level of employment and career opportunities may be quite different to those who only have a mild hearing loss; however, it is impossible to distinguish this fact. Nevertheless, these reports do provide a snapshot. For example, data regarding the first destination of deaf graduates in 2008/9 showed an increase in unemployment levels of over 100% in just two years - a rise from 6.4% in 2007 to 13.8% in 2009. By the following year, 2009/10, the picture had improved a little, with only 10.0% of graduates with hearing difficulties believed to be unemployed (AGCAS, 2015). The most recent AGCAS report on the destinations of the 2016 graduates (AGCAS 2018) again shows more positive outcomes, with 6.8% of graduates with a hearing loss being unemployed, compared with 5.4% of non-disabled graduates. However, whilst this is the second lowest unemployment total of any specific group of disabled graduates, it still remains significantly higher than the non-deaf graduate workforce.

This lack of research into deaf graduates has to be seen within the context of a sustained government drive designed to encourage HEIs to enhance the employability of their graduates by developing competencies and employability skills beyond those core to their degree discipline (Willets, 2013; Tariq et al., 2012). In order to assess how successful these initiatives have been amongst deaf graduates who are sign language users, a small-scale research project was undertaken. Eight recent deaf graduates from an English university were interviewed on their experiences, together with a specialist careers adviser for deaf students and the data collected forms the basis for this article. All interviewees have been anonymised.

Context

According to Confederation of British Industry surveys (CBI, 2009a; 2009b), 78% of organisations reported that they recruit graduates on the basis of personal attributes and skills and 82% of the organisations wanted universities to do more to foster these skills. It has been argued that graduates need to be able to show they possess the skills valued by employers and must be able to demonstrate how their experience of the undergraduate curriculum developed these skills (Washer, 2007). It is also clear that students themselves are aware of the difficulties they face when entering the graduate labour market and know that they need to develop employability skills so that they stand apart from graduates with similar academic achievements (Tomlinson, 2007; 2008). All students are expected to develop a range of generic and specific employability skills. These include communication skills, emotional intelligence and career development learning. Certain of these pose particular challenges to universities to meet the specific learning needs of deaf students, whilst others place additional burdens on students to make the most of the opportunities offered by university level study in terms of developing their employability skills.

Generic Skills

The acquisition of generic skills, also known as transferable, core and key skills, is at the forefront of current university policy. It is now widely accepted that HEIs need to provide students with more than just the content of their academic discipline (Green, Hammer & Star, 2009). However, the term 'employability skills' was not one that the deaf students interviewed for this project were familiar with. Whilst this may have been a communication issue (the students may not have been explicitly introduced to the concept in class), this does reflect a lack of explicit sign-posting on behalf of the teaching staff. However, this lack of awareness of the term 'employability skills' did not indicate a lack of such skills or an unawareness of the importance of these attributes for their longer-term career ambitions. When asked about the skills they needed to acquire to help them to find employment, the responses were very similar to those discussed in the literature:

'... general things like time-keeping and organisation, communication, team work and networking. General skills, really, nothing specific.' (Sian).

Furthermore, students were aware of the skills employers were seeking from them:

‘Theory and academic knowledge, weaknesses and strengths, organisational skill, assimilating new information, problem-solving ... ’ (Will).

Raising self-confidence was an important result of acquiring these skills for deaf students, who regularly comment on the lack of engagement with their hearing peers (Nikolarazi & Hadjikakou, 2006). Although initially uncertain in such situations, the visual aspects of university work, such as delivering presentations, allowed deaf students to gain confidence that could then be used to underpin other aspects of their studies and careers.

Another, perhaps unexpected, by-product of delivering presentations was the acquisition of skills relating to working with sign language interpreters. Deaf children are not taught how to work with interpreters as they generally do not have such support in schools. When deaf students arrive at university, they are suddenly expected to know how to work with fully-qualified interpreters. What ensues is a steep learning curve, and this can result in the acquisition of a number of additional - but hidden - employability skills, beyond those acquired by non-deaf students:

‘I had to make sure that the interpreter was prepared, so that they could relay the [presentation] information accurately to the audience. I also learned about time management, because [...] the interpreters had rules about punctuality. If I was more than, say, 10 minutes late, the interpreter would leave. So, knowing that there were consequences for arriving late helped me with time management skills’ (Jack).

Emotional Intelligence

Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007) explicitly highlight emotional intelligence (EI) as an important, yet often unrecognised or understated factor in relation to employability. Following Goleman (1998), they discuss the importance of emotional intelligence as a means to develop the prime qualities which enhance and maintain employability. According to Matthews et al. (2002:58):

“Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify, express and understand emotions; to incorporate emotions into thought; and to normalise both positive and negative emotions”.

As emotional intelligence is about human interaction, interpersonal skills and recognising the emotions of others, it is interesting to consider how this might manifest itself in deaf people who use a visual-gestural language and consequently face communication barriers. This gives rise to the question of

how easy it is to develop emotional intelligence when one cannot hear how spoken language is employed or easily interact in a myriad of ways with the majority hearing culture. Despite being of intrinsic importance in itself, and despite the important connection between EI and employability, there is virtually nothing in the literature specifically relating to EI and deaf people. The term 'emotional intelligence' (EI) comprises (amongst other traits) basic social skills, self-motivation, a positive attitude to work, interpersonal skills, empathy and team-working ability. Whilst EI was not explicitly mentioned by the graduates as being a useful employability trait (during the interviews it became apparent that they did not know what the term EI meant), it was evident from their narratives that they did have an abundant capacity for this form of intelligence. Interestingly, much of this related to deaf/hearing relationships.

Of particular importance was the emphasis the interviewees placed on team-working solutions in deaf-hearing situations; a critical skill for them in the workplace. Many of the interviewees felt it was important for both deaf and hearing people to understand that they each perceive the world and its contexts in different – sometimes radically dissimilar – ways. This is arguably the embodiment of deaf epistemology; the deaf way of knowing (Paul & Moores, 2010). Having been brought up in hearing families and educated in mainstream classrooms, these interviewees were acutely aware of the different world views of deaf and hearing people. They also realised that these understandings may be communicated differently so there might be a need to actively seek common ground in order for all parties to work effectively together; a clear example of emotional intelligence:

'In class I might sense that others might not understand something so I would look to work with them so that we could support one another, but sometimes we would understand things differently' (Will).

Maybe through a lifetime of watching hearing people struggle to communicate with them, they were attuned to body language and facial expression which denoted, for example, a reticence to communicate. What was interesting, was their understanding of this phenomenon:

'Some of [my hearing colleagues] weren't deaf aware and didn't know how to communicate, so they felt awkward and uncomfortable engaging with me - which I accept and understand' (Tariq).

This awareness of the attitudes of hearing people towards deaf people was epitomised by the concept of 'the hearing world', a term used by several interviewees and encapsulated in the following quotations:

'Society just doesn't understand what it is like to be deaf [...] Hearing people do not understand the difficulties deaf people face' (Pradeep).

'Some hearing people think deaf people are stupid, 'deaf and dumb'. They don't think we are equal or the same as hearing people' (Jack).

Another EI trait is being aware of others' needs and acting upon this, a key factor in the workplace. The interviewees all discussed being deaf in a hearing world and the implications of this. In each case, it is evident that they were aware of their own responsibility in making things work:

'I was invited to be a society rep, and it was an incredibly difficult task making sure that the society suited everyone's needs, both deaf and hearing members. This was a balancing act, and a huge responsibility' (Will).

'I am confident about meeting new [hearing] people. I can empathise well, and adapt to their communications needs' (Sian).

Some of the interviewees also discussed their own role in educating others about deafness and what deaf people can do. Terry, for example, recognised the distress many hearing parents feel when they have a deaf child, and he considered it his role to educate these parents about the positive aspects of having a deaf child:

'A lot of the families with deaf children are hearing, but they don't know what it means to be deaf. I can let them know that I have been through the same things, and I can talk to them about how they can break down the barriers, and how their children can do the same things as hearing people' (Terry).

'When I meet families, of course, they are all different. I explain that as my family are hearing, they have given me an insight into how they felt when they found out I was deaf. This has given me understanding that I can share with new families' (Sian).

In summary, the interviewees showed that they had acquired interpersonal skills, the ability to identify, express and understand emotions, self- and social

awareness and a host of other skills that comprise emotional intelligence. Whilst it is not possible to quantify how much of this skill they had acquired whilst at university and how much they had brought with them, it was clear that being deaf in a hearing majority environment had certainly played its part in developing this trait. However, despite having greater opportunities to develop emotional intelligence, this in itself does not overcome many of the other barriers deaf graduates face in gaining other employability skills. This in turn means that employers are missing out on potential staff with a highly prized employability attribute.

Communication

Oral and written communication skills are also regarded as important skills for employability (e.g. Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Greatbatch & Lewis, 2007; UKCES, 2009) and these present particular and potentially significant challenges for deaf students whose primary form of communication is British Sign Language. 'Communication' (including both oral and written forms) was highlighted as one of four key skills by Dearing (1997), whilst Morley et al. (2006) found that employers ranked communication skills second in importance after interpersonal/team-working skills. Employers regard writing as a 'threshold' skill, with graduates not being appointed or promoted without the ability to write well (Tariq et al., 2012). Deaf students are aware of the importance of good written communication skills and whilst these are both a requirement and an expectation of degree-level study, there is very little practical training for students to develop these skills independently. It is worth noting the literacy delay which deaf students face. Whilst changes in education policy and practice have led to increased numbers of deaf students entering Higher Education (HESA, 2015/16), many still enter universities under-prepared in terms of their ability to access and produce written English at HE level (c.f. Appendix 3 in Barnes and Wight, 2002). In short, they face a substantial language barrier and so struggle to understand textual material and complete written course assignments. This is not a reflection on their intellectual ability so much as an acknowledgement that they are expected to function at a high level in a language which is not only a second language to them, but one which they do not have the natural ability to acquire (Barnes, 2006).

For these reasons, deaf students are often supported individually by a Language Tutor (LT). Tutors undertake a variety of tasks, including helping students prepare for assignments, assisting with the planning and organisation of projects, advising on essay structure and presentation of work, modifying the language of course materials, examinations and assignment briefs. Whilst

general written communication skills are not taught at university, all of the respondents remarked on the value of working with Language Tutors to improve their English:

‘When I came to university, my Language Tutor really helped me to improve my written work and improve my grammar’ (Jack).

‘My Language Tutor helped me a great deal. It was fabulous! I was very happy with her. My tutor had an English degree. She was excellent. She taught me vocabulary and grammar. She taught me a lot about English. I really developed and improved my English skills’ (Pradeep).

As mentioned earlier, oral communication skills are also highly regarded by prospective employers. This is clearly problematic for deaf students. The majority of sign language users never develop these skills and so this presents an insurmountable obstacle for deaf graduates unless an employer is willing to provide interpreter support in the workplace. However, it is clear from the interview data, that the university has enabled some deaf students to develop effective and alternative non-oral communication skills that are not necessarily recognised and utilised by employers. This is to say that many of the respondents felt that their fluency in British Sign Language had been greatly enhanced during their time at university. Will and Pradeep had both studied British Sign Language (BSL) at university and they both felt that improving their BSL communication skills would enhance their employment opportunities. This illustrates the development of self-reflection on the part of these graduates, which comes as an unintended but beneficial consequence of their broader studies. This also demonstrates an awareness that for them good communication necessarily includes honed skills in their first language. Deaf students at all levels of compulsory education are rarely taught sign language and their language fluency is never assessed against nationally recognised standards. This compares unfavourably with the situation of hearing students, who are taught and assessed in their written and oral language skills throughout their school life. Those deaf students who do learn to sign often do so through informal learning picked up from other students, without ever being checked whether or not they are signing correctly.

Career Development Learning.

Career development might be defined as a series of ongoing activities and processes aimed at developing an individual’s career. This might involve acquiring new skills, taking on more job responsibilities or promotion, making a

career change or setting up in business. Career development is directly linked to the goals and objectives of the individual and begins with an assessment of that person's interests and capabilities. The individual then needs to find ways to acquire the skills needed for their chosen career path. Once the required level of competency has been achieved, the individual then needs to apply these skills and competencies within the workplace.

It is now a standard expectation that HEIs will embed career development learning within the teaching curriculum. However, the experiences of the interviewees in this study suggest this is not always the case. Sian, Niall and Tariq recall that their course tutors did not provide any support, or even information about finding employment.

'I didn't even know what having a job meant. No-one sat me down and explained it to me' (Tariq).

In fact, Niall felt that careers advice was only given to certain students:

'But there was nothing offered from here, maybe there were some opportunities offered to the teacher's pets, you know the favourites in the group, but for me, nothing ... there was that kind of attitude' (Niall).

It is not clear if this is a reflection of the isolation Niall felt as the only deaf student on the course but this lack of tutor engagement was reiterated by Jack. He felt that his deafness was a contributory factor to his tutors failing to support his career development:

'It wasn't always easy to engage with the lecturers about work, as I think they were a bit uncomfortable and thought that deaf people would struggle to find jobs' (Jack).

Furthermore, Jack felt that the main way in which information about employment was disseminated was by 'word of mouth' and not presented in any visual or formal format. He believed that this represented an additional barrier for deaf students seeking work.

This lack of job-seeking skills or careers guidance was also reported by several other interviewees:

'I wish they had told me more about jobs and employment. I wish they had prepared me for the real world so it wasn't a shock' (Pradeep).

'Looking back, the tutors could have done more to help us find work. They could have brought people in, who had been on the course and who had found employment. The tutors should have encouraged us to look for jobs related to our subjects' (Deana).

However, it must be accepted that some of this failure to seek careers advice might be due to a lack of awareness on the part of the respondents that it was partly their responsibility to seek work. This might arise from their previous experiences within an overprotective deaf education system. In many respects, deaf pupils are not provided with the opportunity to develop the necessary skills for self-determination and, arguably, this continues to impact on their ability to take control of many areas of life (See Skelton & Valentine, 2003). At least one respondent seemed to expect the university to find employment on behalf of its deaf graduates:

'No-one has given me a job [...] I am really disappointed with the university. It's their responsibility to teach us how to get a job' (Pradeep).

In addition, this passivity amongst deaf students in terms of taking responsibility for their career and employment options is reflected by Tariq:

'They sent information out about events that were happening, but they didn't promote it any further or encourage us to go. Perhaps if they had told me to go, I would have done, or if they had organised for us to go to an event. [...] They left it up to us to take the lead and please ourselves if we went' (Tariq).

It should be added that whilst these findings relate solely to the deaf participants in this study, if employability skills are not embedded in the curriculum, then all students will be adversely affected. Nonetheless, the overall picture of deaf students' experiences regarding career development in Higher Education might appear less than ideal.

Work Experience

One aspect of the opportunities offered by university that has proved to be successful in terms of securing employment has been undertaking formal work placements or other forms of work experience, such as volunteering or part-time work. Numerous research studies have shown that work experience

amongst graduates is highly valued amongst employers (Dearing, 1997; Holmes, 2001; Lees, 2002; Harvey, 2003; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Paisley & Paisley, 2010; Higher Education Careers Service Unit, 2018). The three interviewees who found employment after leaving university had all undertaken formal work placements or voluntary work which they felt was a crucial factor in securing a job:

‘I did three voluntary jobs [...] and all of this voluntary work helped me to get the job I have now, because the jobs are clearly linked [to my current work]’ (Sian).

Whether the value of such opportunities is being passed on to all deaf students is less clear:

‘When I look back, my friends had work placements offered to them but I missed out. When they were going off for a year, travelling and getting work experience, I was at university concentrating on my modules. I hadn’t been taught about work and I never thought about doing a work placement’ (Tariq).

Despite the clear value of work placements, only two of the interviewees were required to undertake formal placements as part of their course:

‘I think studying and working at the same time helped to develop me. If I had just concentrated on my studies and not done any voluntary work or work experience, I think it would have been harder to develop my skills’ (Terry).

Terry’s comment reflects research undertaken elsewhere. An investigation into the longitudinal benefits of work experience for graduates’ skills development was undertaken by Harvey et al. (1997). This study found that respondents overwhelmingly endorsed work-based placements as a means of helping students develop attributes that would help them to be successful in the workplace. These findings were replicated by a European-wide Flash Eurobarometer survey in 2010 which covered companies in all 27 EU Member States, Norway, Iceland, Croatia and Turkey (Flash Eurobarometer, 2010).

Jack also took a compulsory work experience module, which he completed over the summer. He especially valued this opportunity, because he realised finding paid work experience as a deaf student was difficult:

‘The work experience module worked best for me [...] Finding part-time work when you are deaf is hard because of the communication side of things, so this work experience was great for me’ (Jack).

All of the other interviewees stated their disappointment that work placements were not offered as part of their course, and furthermore, that work placement opportunities either within or outside their institution were never mentioned:

‘I just wish that the university had advised me more about doing some voluntary work or work placement but they didn’t and I never thought about it’ (Tariq).

Pradeep also felt strongly that the university could do much more in the way of providing work placement opportunities. He put this into the wider context of disability employment and the need for a proactive approach to supporting disabled students into the workplace:

‘I think the university should offer more work placements. There should be work placements, advice about filling in application forms, how to provide evidence to put onto C.V.s, because it is a huge challenge. I think for disabled people it is even more difficult. They should offer disabled people more training. It would make it fairer if this was to happen’ (Pradeep).

Within this context, Pradeep also illustrated not only an awareness of inequality in the search for employment but also a lack of training and preparation for disabled people, which needs to be addressed:

‘We don’t want people to be frightened of employing disabled people. And disabled people need preparing for the workplace’ (Pradeep).

Work experience was seen to encompass more than simply a work placement, with a need to more explicitly connect theoretical knowledge to its practical application and students’ experiences:

‘I think there should be a better balance between theory and actual employability training within the modules. We are taught the theory but not how to apply this to the workplace’ (Pradeep).

This criticism of the lack of explicit links between the curriculum and its practical application to the workplace is prevalent within the literature (Harvey et al., 1997; Crebert et al., 2004) and suggests that this is a failing across the university sector which employers are also beginning to recognise (Bridges, 2000; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Jackson & Wilton, 2016).

It is evident throughout this research study that students found work placements to be a critical component in their quest for employment and whether or not they were offered or supported in finding a placement, they fully understood their value for job seeking strategies and for inclusion on their CVs:

‘If I had some kind of work experience, no matter what it was, it would look better on my CV. I don’t want prospective employers to think I am lazy or have been to prison because I don’t have employment experience on my CV’ (Deana).

The careers adviser also recognised the difficulties deaf students faced in getting some kind of work experience that impeded their chance of gaining employment in the workplace:

‘I think particularly for deaf students, the lack of work experience is a real barrier to them gaining employment. For deaf students in particular, getting some kind of work placement is more than key, it is crucial. Without experience, they have nothing to put on the application form and nothing to sell in the interview’ (Careers Adviser).

She also pointed to the obvious merits in informing the students’ decision-making process, and to their confidence building. She told of a deaf graduate who had not managed to get any form of work experience, which had left him doubting his degree choice and his future direction:

‘We keep going around in circles; he is asking about doing another degree; he is asking what benefit he could get if he continued to study and so on. I want him to pick a starting point and he is not. Lack of real work experience has left him unable to move forward with career decision-making’ (Careers Adviser).

In recognising the barriers deaf students and graduates faced in securing work placements, the careers adviser suggested that one of the easiest places for a deaf graduate to turn was the deaf community ‘*because it is accessible*’. However, this is not always the panacea. Whilst seeking employment after

graduation, Tariq had taken a number of work placement opportunities within the deaf community, but these had been outside his subject area. As a consequence, he felt that rather than enhance his employability, this work experience had diluted his chances of gaining work in his chosen career:

‘When I was looking for work in my field, I found it difficult to get a job, because I didn’t have the experience that they wanted. I had experience, but only of working within the deaf community and not working in the Games industry itself. I didn’t have anything relevant to put on my C.V.’ (Tariq).

In summary, all of the interviewees in this research study were aware of the need for work experience, even if this awareness only became apparent after graduation, whilst they were actively seeking employment. However, even if they had such awareness, interview data and personal experience suggest that it is harder for deaf students to find adequate and appropriate placement opportunities. The ‘communication side of things’ as mentioned earlier by Jack, is a critical factor. For example, interpreter support, funded by Disabled Students Allowance, is not available for informal work placements and Access to Work funding is not applicable for voluntary student placements. So despite policy statements and the value employers place on workplace experience, this important employability skills development opportunity is not readily available to deaf students.

This issue was also highlighted by the specialist careers adviser, who mentioned a student who had wanted to secure a work placement in the sector he had studied and wanted to work in. Whilst the company was willing to offer the placement, they could not fund the interpreter support. Access to Work would not fund it either, because it was not paid employment, and therefore, in the end, the student could not take up the placement offer. The consequences of this are far-reaching in terms of future employability:

‘Because he [the deaf student] couldn’t get the placement - that makes the area he wants to work in that less accessible because he hasn’t got experience in the sector’ (Careers Adviser).

This is a major barrier facing deaf students in seeking work placement opportunities; the lack of interpreter support to gain the experience that would enable them to enter the job market. Ironically, Access to Work funding would be available for this student if he got paid work, but without Access to Work support for the placement, he couldn’t get the experience that would enable him to get this paid employment.

Another graduate had some voluntary work in a charity shop, and whilst the staff tried to help him, there was no interpreter support:

‘It is whether the student can survive in that kind of environment without support, and how worthwhile that experience therefore is, without support and access’ (Careers Adviser).

This is an interesting point; a project by Bennett et al. (2000) showed that the most important sources of employee learning (and by extension, work placement learning) comes from the work itself and from interactions with others in the workplace. For example, graduate employees identified that the major skill to be learned was to ‘fit in’. This meant, amongst other things, adapting to cultural expectations and organisational pressures, and learning the ‘language of the job’. One can question whether or not a deaf student or graduate on placement can ‘fit in’ if there is no interpreter support. How is the deaf student on placement expected to learn enough about the working environment so that they quickly become a valuable asset, and someone the host employer might want to keep? It can be argued, for example, that hearing students on placement learn a great deal about the job, the work-base culture and the working environment through listening to others and through ‘incidental learning’ (see Hopper, 2015). They may use this information to make themselves useful; to get ahead in the workplace. Arguably, even with interpreter support, there is no guarantee that the deaf student will easily ‘fit in’; a third-party-mediator is undoubtedly going to change the work colleague dynamics and in the absence of a common language, potentially lead to an ‘us and them’ situation in the work place.

Conclusion

It has been shown that deaf undergraduates face a variety of barriers in acquiring employability skills as an outcome of their studies. This is not to say that all deaf students fail to acquire such skills; this research has shown that deaf students are able to acquire a number of generic or transferable employability skills whilst at university. Generic skills include organisational ability, time and workload management, presentation skills and raising self-confidence, which is an important factor for deaf students working in a hearing environment.

The importance of acquiring good communication skills is recognised by deaf students but there are clear challenges to doing so. Both oral and written communication are problematic, given that English is effectively a second language for BSL users who often do not have the means to adequately

develop either aspect of language with obvious consequences for future employability. However, students who studied British Sign Language (BSL) at university felt that improving their BSL communication skills would enhance their employment opportunities. This also demonstrates an awareness that for them good communication necessarily includes honed skills in their first language. High level fluency in BSL is necessary in order to work amongst other sign language users within the deaf community or to make best use of interpreters within the workplace. For those deaf students who do not have the option to develop BSL fluency whilst at university, there is no obvious alternative to develop enhanced communication strategies.

The concept of emotional intelligence and its relevance to the workplace for deaf was discussed, in the context of deaf-hearing relationships. Although emotional intelligence is not explicitly taught at university, the deaf students in this study did demonstrate high levels of emotional intelligence. This might be a result of deaf people having to negotiate communication with hearing people, utilising body language, facial expression and all non-verbal aspects of human interaction.

Graduates who participated in this study highlighted career development planning as a particular area of concern. In some instances, students were not even aware of what seeking and obtaining a job entailed and there is a clear lack of incidental learning from peers as a result of the communication barrier that exists between deaf and hearing students. This lack of information can extend to academic staff, who may be unaware of the career opportunities open to deaf people or of the need to signpost deaf students to suitable placement and volunteering opportunities. This requires a greater understanding on the part of hearing university staff on the way in which deaf students can lack access to information that may be more readily available to their hearing peers.

The importance to take part in work placements and volunteering was highlighted as a key factor in gaining employment. This study has shown this is particularly problematic for deaf students who do not have easy access to peer to peer information, academic support or practical communication support. This last element is a consequence of the absence of finance to pay for interpreters within informal or voluntary settings. Once again, this absence of opportunity has a detrimental effect on employability prospects for deaf graduates.

Until a broad range of solutions are introduced to remove or ameliorate these barriers, the employability prospects for deaf graduates will remain even more challenging than those faced by their hearing peers. Resolutions could include compulsory work placements within the curriculum, which would allow

Disabled Student Allowance to be used to fund interpreter support for such placements. Deaf awareness training should be compulsory for tutors and university careers staff, which incorporates advice on career planning pertinent to the specific context of deaf students. Staff should emphasise the benefits and opportunities afforded by placements and volunteering. Bespoke employability skills for deaf students supporting CV writing, completing application forms, seeking employment, interview skills and interpreting job adverts are all key issues identified by deaf graduates and so suitable training is needed. These barriers are not insurmountable and with the introduction of appropriate measures such as those outlined above, the employment prospects of deaf students can be greatly enhanced.

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